
Chapter 1

Cecily Blackthorn stepped out of Capp's and shielded her eyes from the late August Las Vegas sky. She'd left her sunglasses in her car when she'd gone into the restaurant at noon, and she regretted it right now, since the sun was at an angle that made it difficult to see.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket and her body tingled in response. It was the right time of day for the text to be from Ethan Pratt, her lover of a year, and, hopefully, the man who would collar her before long. Of course she thought that last year, too, and it hadn't happened yet.

"Don't count your chickens," she said to herself. Ethan Pratt was one of the most fascinating men she'd ever met. He was handsome, a brilliant lawyer, a shrewd businessman, and a fantastic lover and Dom. He wielded a mean whip and left her feeling the effects for days afterward. It always made her smile. But for several months last year he'd closed himself off to her, and it was almost a year since that happened.

A few blunt questions to his partners at the BDSM Silver Creek Resort, Shawn Hollis and Randy Westin, who had both

been less than forthcoming with their answers. She knew Ethan was a widower, whose wife had been killed, and her murder had never been solved. She knew his withdrawal from the world last year had something to do with that. She wished she could help him, but she knew he wouldn't let her.

She made her way across the parking lot and got into her car, turning it on and making sure the AC was on full blast. It would take a few minutes to cool down totally, but in the meantime she fished her phone out of her pocket and checked the text. True to what she'd thought it was from Ethan.

Ethan: *My dick needs your ass. Are you coming this weekend?*

Cecily: *Coming to Silver Creek? Or just coming? Because I can do the latter here in Las Vegas.*

A few moments later the phone dinged again.

Ethan: *Five minutes in the corner when you get home. Naked, hands behind your back, ass pointed toward the camera on your computer.*

She smiled.

Cecily: *I'm sure my blank computer will enjoy seeing my ass.*

There was a short pause, and she imagined him staring at his phone. He was either frowning because she was being a brat, or he was smiling for the same reason.

Ethan: *Do I have to spell it out for you? Do I need to order you to take a computer class, or do you know how to set up a video chat?*

Cecily: *Better than you, I'm sure.*

She hoped her words would spur him on; but with Ethan you never really knew how he was going to react. That's one of the things that made her want him more and more each day.

Ethan: *You're trying to piss me off.*

Cecily: *Is it working?*

He paused again, which threw her off her game. She was never quite sure if she'd pushed him too hard in trying to build a little tension between them.

Ethan: *Is the lunch rush over?*

Yeah, she'd gone past the point where she should. He wasn't talking about her standing in the corner anymore, and she wondered if he'd bring it up again.

She pushed a few buttons on her console and said, "Call Ethan."

The phone started to ring, and he answered with a short, "Yes, brat."

Cecily laughed. "I'm about to go get my hair done, so yes the lunch rush is over. I thought I'd switch to hands free while I drove."

"Good plan," he said. "Are you coming in Friday night, or Saturday morning?"

"Saturday," she said. "Marcus booked a huge party for Friday night, and we're short-handed."

"I understand," he said. As a businessman himself, even if it was with a BDSM resort, he knew business came first. She'd spent many a weekend at home alone when he had things to tend to at Silver Creek. But she had to admit that at times she wondered what it would be like if they were actually a couple, if she were living at the resort with him, helping to take care of the running, and taking part in the scenes and parties that took place there.

Cecily rather liked the idea when it came to mind, but she'd never brought it up to Ethan. That was something he would have to do, and so far, he had not.

She pulled into the traffic and headed toward Henderson. It was quite a drive just to get her hair done, but she really liked Rose, who had done her hair for years. When Rose had moved her business, Cecily had followed. She hit the 515 and blended into the traffic.

"Are you booked up this weekend?" she asked.

"We are," he said. "Saturday night I'm working the public room, so you can be my hostess."

“I like the sound of that,” she said. She rather liked the idea that Ethan liked to keep things private between them. He didn’t like to play in public, but that didn’t mean he didn’t like to watch. Of course while he was working, he was checking to make sure no one was breaking the rules. They’d had a problem last year with someone sneaking a cell phone into the area, and the photos getting out. The few times she’d worked with him he’d had her on the lookout for phones, or other recording devices. She was sure that’s what he would have her doing Saturday evening, too.

Truth be told she would rather be playing. But after the playroom shut down, he would hopefully take her back to his private dungeon and play with her there. Cecily shivered as she thought about him using the whip on her ass. He was, without a doubt, the most talented Dom she’d ever met.

“What time do you think you’ll be here?” he asked.

“Say noon?” She exited the highway and came to stop at a light. A glance in her rearview mirror showed the car behind her was closer than she liked. She inched forward just a bit, and he did the same.

“Buy me dinner first,” she said.

“We can go into town if you want,” Ethan said, although he sounded a little put out by the idea. “I can meet you there.”

“I’m not talking about Saturday,” she said. “I’m talking about the ass behind me.”

“What’s wrong?” He sounded as if he would come through the phone and attack the driver.

“He’s so close behind me he should buy me dinner, get it?”

“Yeah, I get it,” he said. “Can you see his license plate?”

“I can’t see his bumper,” she said.

“Be careful,” Ethan said. “Try to get behind him somehow. Pull into a parking lot or turn onto a side street. Then get behind him and snap a pic of his license plate.”

“Sure thing Mr. Bond, James Bond.” She laughed. “You’re acting like this is a spy thriller. It’s just a driver who can’t stand it

when he's behind someone at the light. I'm sure it doesn't help that I'm a woman."

The light turned green and Cecily shot forward as fast as she could. She turned right into the first parking lot she came to. The driver behind her followed suit.

"Okay, that's odd." She drove to the edge of the fast food parking lot and pulled into a spot between two vehicles. The car pulled up behind her and stopped.

"Now I'm concerned," she said. She told him where she was, and the fact that the car was sitting right behind her, blocking her exit. "I'm going to get out and take his picture."

"Don't!" Ethan yelled, his voice filling her car. "Stay where you are. I'm texting Murphy."

Chase Murphy, she thought to herself, an LVPD officer they'd met last year.

"I could get out if the car in front of me left," she said. "This is a fast food place. What's taking them so long inside?"

"Stay where you are," Ethan ordered. "Murphy is dispatching a patrol car. Tell me exactly where you are."

She named off a local fast food restaurant, and then jerked when she heard a voice outside say, "What the hell, man? You're blocking me in. Move it or lose it."

The car behind her sped out of the lot. The man who had yelled, or at least she thought that's who it was, came and knocked on her window.

"You okay, lady? Do I need to call the cops?"

"They're already on their way," she said as she ran a shaky hand through her hair. "Thank you."

"You cut him off somewhere? Or is he just a jerk?"

"Just a jerk," she said. Ethan hadn't said anything while she'd been taking to her rescuer.

Finally he said, "Ask him to stay until the cops get there to back up your story."

She rolled down her window to relay Ethan's message. She'd

been talking through it before, and she thought it was rather rude to a man who had come to her aid.

“I’m Cecily Blackthorn,” she said.

“Dennis Sayers,” he answered. “My wife, Louise, is inside taking our son, Carl, to the bathroom. I came out to turn on the air before they got into the car.”

“I’m glad you did,” she said as a patrol car parked behind her. She got out and after the patrolman identified everyone, she told him her story. It was just then that she remembered Ethan was on her phone, and she hadn’t ended the call.

“You were using your cell while your drove?” the officer asked. “Did you maybe cut this guy off?”

“No,” she said. “I was using my hands free.” She went back to the car, even though the officer, named Tim Baker, ordered her back.

“Ethan?” she called out. There was no answer, and a glance at the console told her the call had been disconnected. She imagined him pacing at his house and staring at the phone, yelling at her to call him back.

“Your husband?” Officer Baker asked.

Oh there was a question. How should she describe Ethan to the police? Finally she said, “Lover? Boyfriend? Companion? I’m thirty-three years old, Officer Baker. I’m not sure what word to use. We’re involved, how is that?”

She glanced over at Dennis Sayers, who was looking at the ground so she couldn’t see his expression. The officer was impassive. Then, to her delight, another car pulled up, and Chase Murphy and his partner, Mac Gregory, got out.

They greeted the officer before Murphy said, “Ethan is sick with worry. Call him back.”

She nodded and went back to her car, which she’d turned off earlier and now felt like an oven inside. She hit the first button on her console and Ethan answered immediately. She could tell by the sound that he was outside.

"I'm fine," she said.

"I'm on my way," he replied.

"There's no need," she said. "I'm fine, really."

"I've asked Murphy and Gregory to escort you to the hairdresser's. Call me when you're done."

"Ethan, don't be ridiculous." There was no answer, and she said his name again. Obviously, he'd disconnected the call.

She went toward the group of people. Baker was asking the crowd that had gathered if they had seen anything.

"It's just a little road rage," Cecily said. "All this fuss for something that happens to people all the time." She was more than a little put out by Ethan's reaction, and the fact that he'd drawn Murphy and Gregory into the situation. "It's not like he took a shot at me."

"Thanks to Sayers," Murphy said.

Sayers shrugged, and Cecily went back to her car. She fished a business card and a pen out of her purse and wrote a short note on the back. Then she took it back to Sayers.

"I'm part owner of Capp's," she said as she handed him the card. "This is a free dinner for you and your wife."

"Wow, thanks," Dennis said.

"When you call for a reservation, give them the number on the back of this card and they'll work you in on the night you want to go."

"Louise is going to love this," Dennis said. His wife had gone back in the restaurant with their son. Officer Baker dismissed them all and said he would call Cecily with any updates. She got back in her car and silently cursed Ethan as Murphy and Gregory followed her to the salon.

Rose was not happy that she was late, until she heard the story of what had happened. Then she gasped and said, "Holy crap. Well, the person behind you hasn't shown yet, so let's get you shampooed, and you can tell me all about it."

Cecily took her place in the shampoo chair. Something told

her she would be telling this story for some time to come, and to many different people.

Cecily had just lowered herself into a tub full of bubbles when she heard her front door open. She sat upright and listened as carefully as she could over the CD of thunderstorms that she always played when she wanted to relax in the bath.

Either someone had picked the lock, or one of the two other people who had a key were here. One of those two was her brother, Marcus. But it was just after ten, and she knew he was supervising the late shift at Capp's. She should be there working on the huge party that was being hosted, but he'd told her to go home, so she had.

The other person who had a key was Ethan. She'd left several messages for him after the incident, which he hadn't answered, which told her he on his way from Silver Creek to Las Vegas. Why it had taken him so long she didn't know.

"Where are you?" Ethan called out, his concern evident.

"Follow the storm," she said. When he appeared in the bathroom doorway, she lifted a handful of bubbles and blew them in his direction. "Fancy meeting you here."

The corner of his mouth ticked upward, but he quickly hid any humor he felt at her words.

"I thought I was coming to Silver Creek on Saturday," she said.

"You are." He put the lid down on the toilet and sat. "I just had to see for myself that you were okay, but I had some things I had to take care of at the resort, first."

"You couldn't have returned my texts? Or phone calls?" She didn't want to sound angry, but she did feel a little slighted.

"That happens when you break your phone," he said. "First thing on the agenda for tomorrow morning, get a new phone."

"That sucks." She flicked a bubble toward him. "Join me?"

"We've tried that before," he said. This time his grin stayed on his face. "There's not room for the two of us in there."

Cecily giggled. "You really didn't have to come. I'm fine, really."

Ethan's expression turned stony. "I care about you."

"Nobody else takes your whippings like I do, right?"

"It's more than that," he said. "Listen, there's something the two of us should have talked about a long time ago. After today, I know I can't put it off any longer."

Despite the hot water surrounding her, Cecily felt very cold. "Why do I think I'm about to get the it's not you, it's me speech?"

"I'm not dumping you," he said. "In fact, it's quite the opposite."

The water felt very warm again. "That's good to know."

"Cee, I really want there to be a future for us." He cleared his throat. "Randy told me I've strung you on long enough, and I need to let you inside me, not my body, but my emotions." He cleared his throat again. "My past. The reason that I'm kinda an asshole at times."

She wished he wasn't talking so fast. She'd been up at first, then down, then up, and then even farther down. There was a part of her that worried that, once he'd told his story, which she was sure concerned the death of his wife, that he might decide he didn't want her anymore. She'd lived with the fear that she wouldn't live up to the woman's memory.

A huge part of her wanted to tell him she didn't want to hear it, that they should just stay lovers. But he wanted something more, and truthfully, she did, too. But sometimes when you moved things past where they were, disaster struck, and everything turned to mud.

"Is this going to be a long conversation?" She slipped her hand through the water. "Because if it is, I don't want to sit here

with the water getting colder. Maybe I should get out and put something on.”

“Probably a good idea,” he said. “I’ll work on the food while you get dressed.”

“You calling out for pizza?” she asked as she pulled the plug on the tub and stood.

“Chef sent food,” he said. “Some of those jalapeno poppers that we love, shrimp salad, broccoli and chicken pasta, and some cheesecake.”

“That’s what took you so long to get here?” she asked as she wrapped her towel around herself. “You were waiting for food?”

“That’s what he was putting out for guests at the resort,” he said. “He packed ours on ice for the trip. Meet me in the living room, and don’t come naked. I don’t want to be distracted.”

Cecily took her time. She dried off, slathered herself in lotion, then brushed her teeth. When she was dressed in loose jeans and a t-shirt, she went to the living room to find him sitting on the couch. He’d loaded down two plates, and poured a glass of wine for her, and a beer for him.

She sat down next to him and picked up her plate.

“I hope you haven’t eaten yet,” he said.

“I was going to order a pizza after my bath,” she said. She knew that meant she would be eating late, but she didn’t care. She’d eat pizza any time of the day, even if it did go straight to her hips.

“This is much better for you,” he said before he tucked a bite of shrimp salad in his mouth. Cecily went for the jalapeno poppers.

“Carbs in the pasta and sugar in the cheesecake,” she said. “Really good for me.”

They both chuckled. Then they ate in silence. Finally, he wiped his mouth and said, “Are you sure you’re okay after what happened?”

"A little shook up, but yes, I'm okay. I've never been part of a road rage incident before."

Ethan put his plate back on the table and she watched as he drained his beer. He got up and took another one out of the fridge.

"Is this where you tell me I did something wrong? Something that caused what happened today?"

"Nope," he said. "This is where I tell you my wife was killed in a similar incident."

Cold snaked up her back, and Cecily carefully put her plate down next to his. Ethan's words explained his rather strong reaction.

"Ethan, I'm so sorry."

"It's been six years," he said. "I thought it would get easier, but it hasn't."

"Was it here in town?" Cecily wasn't sure if she should be asking questions or not. Maybe it was better just to let him tell the story on his own.

"Yes," he said. "At first the cops thought I killed her. She was hit by a car, and then someone came back and shot her."

"What?" Surely, she hadn't heard him right.

He hadn't come back from the kitchen. From her place on the sofa she could see him staring at the counter, obviously lost in thought.

"Leah was a lawyer, too," he said. "That's how we met, when we were both hired by the same firm, as clerks while we were still in school. We fell for each other fast."

He stopped speaking once again, his gaze still fixed on the cabinet.

"Come and sit with me," she said. When he didn't move, she said, "Please."

"There's a big part of me that thinks it never happened," he finally said. He still hadn't moved out of the kitchen. She wasn't sure what to say. It was as if they were in some sort of alternate

universe. She'd never known anyone who was murdered before. She couldn't imagine how Ethan felt, even after all these years. It was no wonder this afternoon's near miss had affected him the way it did, why he'd sent the officers they knew to check on her.

After a few long moments he moved back to the sofa and sat next to her, their knees touching. "After Leah's death, and after the cops cleared me, I withdrew from life. It wasn't until I met Shawn and Randy that I started living again, and only because we started Silver Creek and I could have fun without commitment."

He chuckled, and it felt as if the cloud that had shrouded the room was lifted.

"And then I met you." He turned to her. "You are so beautiful, and we both seemed to want the same thing."

"Sex without commitment?" she asked.

"Not just sex." He trailed his finger up her thigh. "As you said, nobody takes my whippings like you do."

Cecily laughed. "It was good, always, from the start."

"We're very well suited together, except for my lapse around the anniversary. Then Randy had a talk with me and told me to get my act together and not let you go. He's right. I had planned on talking to you this weekend, to see if you felt the same."

Now the room was filled with sunlight.

"Does that smile on your face indicate yes?"

Cicely nodded.

"When the road rage thing happened, I had flashbacks," he said. "I remembered the cops calling me and telling me Leah had been hit by a car. That they'd found her in a parking garage. I hate to say that I worried something permanent would happen to you, that you'd be gone, too."

"I'm still here," Cecily said. She swallowed hard. "At the risk of being too forward, does this mean you want to collar me? Do you want me to be yours, exclusively?"

"Yes, it does," he said. "I've put it off far too long."

Cecily lost control of her senses. She climbed on top of Ethan and kissed him.

"Rather forward of you," he said with a laugh. "I'm not just talking about a collar, Cee."

Her heart raced as she looked into his eyes as his words sank in.

"I want you to marry me. We're perfect together. I need you in my life."

"I need you in mine, too," she said.

"Is that a yes?"

Cecily wiped tears off her face, and then she laughed. "Yes, yes, yes!" She leaned over and kissed him.

"Being forward again," he said.

"Well, I have to get all my brattery out of my system now, before the collaring." She kissed him again. "I've never worn a collar before. Well, except for playtime. Now I get to wear it all the time, so people know we're together."

"Brattery?" he asked. "Is that even a word?"

"It is to me." She placed her head on his shoulder.

"And you only wear the full collar at home," he said. "I don't want you scaring the straights with O-rings and leashes."

"But what if I want to?"

Ethan chuckled. "Yeah, that would be you, trying to stir up trouble. I've picked out the perfect collar. It's back at Silver Creek. You will know it marks you as mine, won't you?"

"Yes, Master Ethan," she said.

"Now, go get that paddle I bought for you to keep here. Someone needs her ass reddened."

"Just the paddle?" Cecily pouted.

"Mind your manners, young lady," he said. "And do as you're told or face the consequences."

Cecily made her way toward her bedroom. When she was near the hallway, she looked over her shoulder. "Sometimes the

consequences are great fun. If you give me a choice, I might just select those.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Ethan said. “Now, do as I say before I change my mind.”

Cecily hurried down the hall. Today was ending far better than it had begun.